
Why Consumers Buy Green; Why They Don't

A Barrier/Motivation Inventory: The Basis of Community-Based Social Marketing

Introduction

Understanding what motivates consumers to make environmentally conscious purchases (i.e. to “buy green”) and what discourages them from doing so is the first step in promoting green buying. Social science research makes an important contribution to this understanding. In order to identify the barriers and motivations that are related to people's willingness to buy green, social scientists ask consumers questions about a variety of factors that might influence their buying behavior. They then use statistical methods to determine which of these factors are linked to people's willingness to buy products that are better for the environment.

If you follow the news, you know that scientific studies are not always in agreement. Is margarine good for you or bad for you? High fiber foods lower your cholesterol. Then again, maybe they don't. Estrogen supplements have valuable benefits. But, the dangers might outweigh the benefits. The sorting, sifting and weighing of sometimes contradictory, sometimes confirming evidence is part of the process by which scientists arrive at recommendations regarding health issues.

Similarly, in identifying the factors that influence green buying, it is important to look at patterns that emerge across numerous studies, rather than relying on the results from a single study. Here are some patterns that emerge from social science research on green buying.

Much of the research summarized here has a particular focus on products with recycled content or less (i.e. source reduced) packaging.

Motivations

The factors below are seen to contribute to consumers' willingness to buy green.

Perceived Consumer Effectiveness

An environmental opinion poll of the Canadian population and a phone survey of 387 metropolitan Atlanta residents both resulted in the same conclusion: the more that people believe that the efforts of an individual can make a difference in the solution to environmental problems, the greater their likelihood of buying green.¹

Perceived Knowledge

Perceived knowledge appears to contribute to perceived consumer effectiveness.² Not surprisingly then, the greater people perceive their knowledge to be about buying recycled content and source reduced products, the more likely they are to do so.³

Environmental Concern

Predictably, people's level of environmental concern is linked to their interest in and willingness to purchase green products.⁴ Furthermore, a survey of 201 households in western Los Angeles found that respondents' specific attitudes towards environmental consumerism predicted their likelihood of (a) buying products because of their environmental claims, (b) considering safety to the environment more strongly when making a purchase, and (c) switching products for environmental reasons or purchasing

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brands packaged in recyclable or reusable containers.⁵ Respondents' attitudes towards environmental consumerism were measured by the strength of their agreement with statements such as: "We have a responsibility to avoid purchasing or using products that are known to be damaging to the environment" or "I believe that being environmentally conscious when buying does not directly benefit the environment."⁶

Barriers

The factors below have been identified as barriers to buying green.

Perceptions of Inferior Product Quality

Some consumers believe that because recycled products are manufactured with used materials, they might be of lower quality.⁷ In fact, "...proprietary research conducted by Rubbermaid, a manufacturer of recycled products, concludes that purchase behavior is at least partially determined by beliefs about product quality."⁸ Furthermore, when product performance is an issue, other factors, such as a pro-environmental label, have a diminished impact on people's inclination to buy green.⁹

Skepticism about "Green" Marketing Claims

A variety of polls and surveys indicate that Americans distrust advertising and labeling claims pertaining to the environment.¹⁰ In an Advertising Age poll, more than half of the respondents indicated that they paid less attention to environmental advertising claims because of overkill, and most respondents reported that environmental claims were not particularly believable.¹¹

Difficulty In Identifying Green Products

In Giessen, Germany, a survey of 120 adult shoppers led to the conclusion that people were more likely to follow through on their intention to purchase an environmentally preferable product when the environmentally relevant aspect of the product was more visible.¹² Residents of King County, Washington indicated that the inherent difficulty of locating products with recycled content was a barrier to purchasing them.¹³ Furthermore, a study conducted in Atlanta, GA assessed people's knowledge of phrases, logos and symbols used on packaging and in advertisements to convey information about the environmental impact of the products or packaging. Accurate knowledge was relatively low among a group of environmentally concerned individuals.¹⁴

Price Sensitivity

Marketers have found that even when consumers profess strong support for environmental protection, they are still extremely price sensitive when it comes to buying green.¹⁵ Indeed, a perception among King County, Washington residents that recycled-content products are more expensive was a barrier for them in purchasing these products.¹⁶

Resources

Tools for overcoming the barriers and strengthening the motivations for green buying can be found at <http://www.state.ma.us/dep/recycle/recycle.htm>. Click on "Behavior Change Tools."

Questions about this inventory can be directed to Brooke Nash of the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, Municipal Recycling Branch, at 617-292-5984.

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End Notes

- ¹ Berger, I.E. & Corbin, R.M. (1992) p87; Ellen, P.S., et. al. (1991) p109.
- ² Ellen, P.S. et. al. (1991) p111.
- ³ Ellen, P.S. (1994) p48.
- ⁴ Mainieri, T., et. al. (1997) p201; Schwepker, C.H. & Cornwell, T.B. (1991) p95; Biswas, A., et. al. (2000) p4.
- ⁵ Mainieri, T., et. al. (1997) p200.
- ⁶ Mainieri, T., et. al. (1997) p196.
- ⁷ Biswas, A., et. al. (2000) p4; McKenzie-Mohr, D. (2000) p535.
- ⁸ Biswas, A., et. al. (2000) p4.
- ⁹ Shrum, et. al. (1995) p9.
- ¹⁰ Ellen, P.S. et. al. (1991) p111; Shrum, et. al., (1995) p1; McKenzie-Mohr, D. (2000) p535.
- ¹¹ Shrum, et. al., (1995) p1.
- ¹² Hormuth, S. E. (1999) p281.
- ¹³ McKenzie-Mohr, D. (2000) p535.
- ¹⁴ Ellen, P.S. (1994) p45 & 50.
- ¹⁵ Mainieri, T. et. al., (1997) p193.
- ¹⁶ McKenzie-Mohr, D. (2000) p535.

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